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# Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

MARY ELLEN LAMB

THROUGH THE CROSS-DISCIPLINARY WORK of sociologists, social historians, and literary scholars, the field of popular culture has become increasingly sophisticated. Critiques of the concept of “popular culture” itself have proven particularly productive. As Peter Burke has observed, the term *popular* falsely implies the existence of a single culture rather than shifting alliances of various social groups according to vocation, geographical location, and gender.<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall and Tim Harris raise difficulties with binary divisions—in the two-way traffic between members of popular and elite cultures, in their sharing of texts and customs, in complex forms of cross-identification, and in the rise of “the middling sort” as a third term.<sup>2</sup> Hall loosened this binary somewhat with a more flexible representation of “popular culture” in “continuing tension (relationship, influence, and antagonism) to the dominant culture,” and Scott Shershow has recently argued that popular culture exists with dominant or elite cultures only in relational terms, as a “participant in intricately interrelated fields of cultural production whose distinctions are merely self-constructed and self-proclaimed.”<sup>3</sup> Objecting to Fredric Jameson’s insistence on “the essentially polemic and subversive strategies that characterize the culture of subordinate or dominated groups,” he questions the viability of political action on the grounds that the existence of “autonomous and alternative subcultures” is not possible.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that with the field irrevocably changed, its scholars must confront new and knotty problems. How is it possible for scholars to discuss popular

<sup>1</sup> See Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978), 23–64, esp. 31–50. Stuart Hall points out that the dominant culture is also composed of “an alliance of classes, strata, and social forces” (“Notes on Deconstructing the Popular” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, Raphael Samuel, ed. [London: Routledge, 1981], 227–40, esp. 238).

<sup>2</sup> Hall, 238; and Tim Harris, “The Problem of Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century London,” *History of European Ideas* 10 (1989): 43–58. See also Roger Chartier, “Culture as Appropriation” in *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, Steven L. Kaplan, ed. (Berlin and New York: Mouton, 1984), 229–53.

<sup>3</sup> Hall, 235; and Scott Cutler Shershow, “New life: cultural studies and the problem of the ‘popular,’” *Textual Practice* 12.1 (1998): 23–47, esp. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Shershow, 30.

culture without implying a single culture, or without implying a binary relationship with another culture? What are the options for political action if popular culture functions only as one sign in an interrelated discursive field? With its edges blurring, popular culture begins, like Polonius's clouds, to look "like a camel indeed" and backed "very like a whale" (*Hamlet*, 3.2.376, 381).<sup>5</sup>

In early modern England the shape of "popular" or "low" culture was rendered all the more indistinct by a massive social movement underway in the seventeenth century but not yet completed. While scholars may debate its causes, its extent, or its exact dates, few would disagree with Peter Burke's statement that "in 1500 . . . popular culture was everyone's culture," but by 1800 popular culture was for the "lower classes."<sup>6</sup> To restate this observation in relational terms, popular culture became visible only sometime after 1500, when its customs and values were deployed along a hierarchy of social distinction. As long as it belonged to everyone, then, in a sense, it did not yet exist as a distinct and separate culture. And if by 1800 popular culture was for the "lower classes," it came firmly into play, paradoxically enough, only when it was no longer "popular." This is when some customs and practices became identified as the property of a smaller, less prestigious group, sometimes to slip from visibility entirely. By the end of the sixteenth century this shift was far from complete: early moderns were located somewhere between separation and identification. Their lived experience of this transition must at times have been disorienting, creating a sense of distanciation, of things "small and undistinguishable, / Like far-off mountains turned into clouds," or of a double awareness, so that "with parted eye . . . everything seems double" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 4.2.186–89). Yet, however disorienting, this social shift had real effects that implicated the early modern stage. Richard Helgerson has ably described the evolving social disparity that divided the Globe from Blackfriars by the end of Shakespeare's career; and Burke has observed that even those public theaters where Shakespeare's plays had once been performed were no longer refined enough for the upper classes by the early seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup>

This essay engages these issues of popular culture in two ways. First I respond to recent critiques by demonstrating the possibility of political agency in a host of early modern practices involving fairies and Robin Goodfellow. These practices delineate

<sup>5</sup> Quotations from Shakespeare follow *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 4th ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Burke, 270.

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992), 242; and Burke, 277. This shift in cultural prestige was further promoted by Elizabeth's government, which, according to Louis Montrose, "engaged in efforts to curtail traditional, amateur forms of popular entertainment and festivity," including local acting traditions, as part of a consolidation of monarchical power from regional centers (*The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996], 24 and 28).

a social formation composed of loosely linked and heterogeneous members addressing local problems as individuals or small groups: highwaymen, servants willing to take bribes, parents of unwanted children, young women who became pregnant by men they did not know or could not name. Drawing on James C. Scott's model of class resistance based on "implicit understandings and informal networks" rather than on direct confrontation, I explore how references to fairies and to Robin Goodfellow often served as a "weapon of the weak," which, along with "footdragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, [and] sabotage," enacted an "everyday form of peasant resistance" to unwanted social controls.<sup>8</sup> Any binary division of classes into weak and strong becomes complicated, however, by cross-class collaborations in evading social control, as, for example, in acts of bribery or illicit sexual relations. Yet even these collaborations often convey the sense that such practices, designed to provide remedies outside established institutions such as law courts or churches, belonged to the groups whose interests were least often addressed by hierarchical authority—those of lower economic status or, interestingly, women of any economic status. In terms of this model, "popular culture" as such both did and did not exist. On one hand, shared use of fairy allusions confirms the existence of Jameson's subversive strategies by revealing a community of interpreters centered in groups marginalized from established modes of power. On the other hand, there is little evidence of cross-identification between the subgroups of this community of interpreters. A highwayman may not have thought of himself in the same social category as a servant girl impregnated by her master. For him, even under similar conditions of social and economic oppression, the notion of a shared culture may not as yet have come into play.

The second section of this essay considers the emergence of a concept of popular culture through the literary representation of fairies and Robin Goodfellow in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Unlike scholars who have reassessed the relationship of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to its popular roots,<sup>9</sup> I explore the play's production of a popular culture neither entirely separate from nor entirely assimilated by a dominant culture composed of the middling and elite social groups. Fairies and

<sup>8</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1985), xvi.

<sup>9</sup> Excellent treatments of popular culture in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* include Theodore B. Leinwand, "I believe we must leave the killing out': Deference and Accommodation in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Renaissance Papers 1986*, Dale B. J. Randall and Joseph A. Porter, eds. (Durham, NC: Southeastern Renaissance Conference, 1986), 11–30; Richard Wilson, "The Kindly Ones: The Death of the Author in Shakespearean Athens" in *New Casebooks: A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Richard Dutton, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 198–222; Michael Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985); and Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 52–70.

Robin Goodfellow import some of their subversive potential into the play as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* literalizes the ongoing use of fairy practices in order to allude to understandings, especially sexual understandings, shared within a discursive community. But the meanings of these fairy signs within the dominant culture do not correlate precisely with their meanings as practiced within what I will call the "common" culture.<sup>10</sup> As Jameson has observed, any culture is an "objective mirage that arises out of the relationship between at least two groups"; an inevitably distorting system of distinctions is necessary for popular and dominant—low and high—to act, in Shershow's terms, as mutually constitutive "participants in intricately interrelated fields of cultural production." These distinctions become encoded in the play's strikingly disjunctive settings to form a rough binary of high and low through which to generate cultural meanings. Though far from rigid, this early modern binary is subject to some of the critiques directed at modern binaries, such as their representation of homogeneous groups rather than shifting alliances. The primary function of the play's disjunctive settings is to initiate a conceptual separation that prepares for the eventual withdrawal of the dominant community from popular roots. This essay will explore how *A Midsummer Night's Dream* stages the impossibility of this social separation. In Kristevan terms, popular culture became an "abject," something rejected by higher-status social groups from which they could not part.<sup>11</sup>

The extent to which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* stages the urge to withdraw from a common culture more or less than the urge to remain identified with it was no doubt subject to interpretation even for early modern audiences. As Montrose has maintained, collective social structures within early modern England were experienced by the subjects as "multiple, heterogeneous, and even contradictory"; early modern theater in particular had within itself "the capacity to produce heterodoxy" even within the "context of an absolutist ideology."<sup>12</sup> From this perspective *A Midsummer Night's Dream* remained open to popular as well as elite cultural allegiances. However these allegiances were experienced, the play's representation

<sup>10</sup> The various connotations of the term *common* all apply during this period of transition. The culture was "common" in that in the fifteenth century it was shared by all, from illiterate nurses to aristocratic males, who were, according to Peter Burke, "amphibious, bi-cultural, and also bilingual" (28) in English and Latin, although Burke does not discuss the problem of integrating the very different ideologies and values inculcated by these two cultures. Before the withdrawal of the gentry and the middling sort, the culture held in "common" was also "common" in the sense of ordinary, not worth special attention. As this withdrawal progressed, popular culture became "common" in the sense of "vulgar."

<sup>11</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Montrose, 15 and 85.

of the fairies, as well as its transformation of the hairy Robin Goodfellow of ballad tradition to a courtly Puck, take on more than aesthetic or literary meanings. The progressive separation and withdrawal from a common culture renders the play's staging of these fairy figures profoundly social and ultimately political. Shakespeare's representation of fairies includes a part of what Scott has called the "struggle over the appropriation of symbols" in a "continuous effort to give partisan meaning to local history."<sup>13</sup> In these social and historical contexts *A Midsummer Night's Dream* provides an opportunity to explore a seminal moment in the production of popular culture.

## I

As one of the first antiquarians of popular culture, John Aubrey serves as an early informant on the customs surrounding the fairies and Robin Goodfellow in the early modern period. Aubrey's nostalgic memories of his pre-Civil War childhood draw together a number of the practices commonly associated with these figures:

When I was a Boy, our Countrey-people would talke much of them: They were wont to please the Fairies, that they might doe them no shrewd turnes, by sweeping clean the Hearth, and setting by it a dish whereon was sett a messe of milke sopt with white bread: and did sett their Shoes by the Wre, and many times on the morrow they should Wnd a threepence in one of them. But if they did speak of it they never had any again. . . . They would churne the creame &c. . . . That the Fairies would steale away young children and putt others in their places: verily believed by old woemen in those dayes: and by some yet living.<sup>14</sup>

Aubrey's account has particular value because it conveys not only the customs but also the discursive circumstances by which they were transmitted. Like many early modern men of learning, Aubrey was culturally "amphibious"—reared in a community of "Countrey-people" and "old woemen" before he entered what Burke calls the "great tradition" through education in the texts and values of a literate society.<sup>15</sup> Thus for Aubrey the question of belief in fairies is complicated by his experience of fairy customs in boyhood. Scholars of various disciplines have abundantly demonstrated the problems raised by assessing belief in general. As Keith Thomas notes, "the fact that

<sup>13</sup> Scott, xvii.

<sup>14</sup> John Aubrey, "Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme" in *Three Prose Works*, ed. John Buchanan-Brown (Fontwell, Sussex: Centaur Press, 1972), 126–304, esp. 203; this passage is discussed in Gail Kern Paster and Skiles Howard, eds., *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Texts and Contexts* (New York and Boston: Bedford Books, 1999), 310–12.

<sup>15</sup> Burke, 28.



fairy-beliefs seem to have had childhood associations for most commentators makes it harder to assess their vitality at any particular period.<sup>16</sup> How is it possible to determine the accuracy of Aubrey's observation that the fairies were "verily believed [in] by old women in those dayes"? The circumstances surrounding the transmission of these customs to young children may have fostered an illusion of belief in fairies. Marina Warner has discussed the telling of fairy tales by old women to diminish their powerlessness in a household controlled by younger, more active women;<sup>17</sup> the same dynamic may also have been at work with fairy practices. What better way for a country servant, especially an old woman servant, to gain psychological power over her master's children than to impress them with the powers of magical forces within the household, known to her in a way unavailable to the more educated members of the household? Alternatively, a servant's professing belief in fairies may have been preferable to explaining the underlying social customs enacted through fairy practices to a boy like Aubrey, whose allegiance would soon belong to a more powerful social formation.

Given these limitations on the accuracy of Aubrey's childhood memory, there is still no doubt that some early modern adults "believed" in fairies. Gullible victims demonstrated their belief by freely giving money to con artists in exchange for a meeting with the queen of the fairies.<sup>18</sup> The "belief" of Welsh conjurers that they walked with the fairies on Tuesday and Thursday evenings becomes more plausible

<sup>16</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 608. In addition to Thomas, see also Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 73–93; and Hilda Geertz, "An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, 1," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6 (1975): 71–89, esp. 79. In *The Scythe of Saturn: Shakespeare and Magical Thinking* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1994) Linda Woodbridge argues that even with the passing of serious belief in magic, magical thinking continued to structure unconscious mental processes in this period.

Extensive information on early modern representations of fairies and Robin Goodfellow has been accumulated by Minor Latham in *The Elizabethan Fairies* (New York: Columbia UP, 1930); by James Orchard Halliwell in *Illustrations of the Fairy Mythology of A Midsummer Night's Dream* (London: The Shakespeare Society, 1845); or by Katherine Briggs in *The Anatomy of Puck: An Examination of Fairy Beliefs Among Shakespeare's Contemporaries and Successors* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1967), and *The Vanishing People: Fairy Lore and Legends* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). Keith Thomas points out the "heterogeneous" nature of fairy lore, drawn from "ancestral spirits, ghosts, sleeping heroes, fertility spirits and pagan gods" (606–14, esp. 607). See also Paster and Howard, eds., 307–10.

<sup>17</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 229–37.

<sup>18</sup> See the anonymous pamphlet *The Bridling, Sadling, and Ryding of a Rich Churle in Hampshire, by the Subtill Practise of one Judeth Philips* (London, 1595), in which a "rich churle" gives money to one Judith Philips to saddle, bridle, and ride him to meet the queen of the fairies. See also *The Examination of John Walsh . . .* (London, 1566) and "The severall notorious and lewd Cousonages of John West, and Alice West, falsely called the King and Queene of Fayries . . ." (London, 1613), reprinted in Halliwell, ed., 181–94.

when compared to even stranger accounts by Italian *benandanti* of how, armed with fennel stalks, they did periodic battle with malevolent powers in order to save the season's crop.<sup>19</sup> As detailed by Keith Thomas within the context of a decline of belief in magic, numerous indications of local faith in various forms of magic, including fairy magic, lingered especially in rural areas.<sup>20</sup> But while fairy belief existed, it was far from universal. Reginald Scot's 1584 *Discoverie of witchcraft* lists "fairies" along with "spirits, witches, vrchens, elues, hags, . . . satyrs, pans, faunes" and "Robin good-fellow" as terrifying "bugs" commonly passed down in childhood by "our mothers maids."<sup>21</sup> Scot suspects that the "boll of milke" set out for Robin Goodfellow by "your grandams maides" "for grinding of malt or mustard, and sweeping the house at midnight" was actually eaten by "a cousening idle frier, or some such roge."<sup>22</sup> To account for practices such as those recorded by Scot and Aubrey, some scholars have moved from determining levels of a given belief to analyzing how beliefs function within a society. Thomas argues that fairy beliefs led to cleaner houses and dairies as well as to increased vigilance over newborn infants.<sup>23</sup>

The functional approach to fairy belief obscures a pragmatic problem of agency, as raised, for example, by the suspicions of Scot: Who did eat the milk sopped in cream? Who did drop money in the shoes of maids who cleaned well, and who pinched them at night? Why did parents claim that a changeling was substituted for their newborn? What had happened to their newborn? While the role of the standard fairy practices and the alleged pranks of Robin Goodfellow is precisely to obscure agency, material for educated speculation is provided by references to fairies in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*, in other contemporary plays, in a ballad and a pamphlet of Robin Goodfellow, in references to rebels and thieves, and in evasive allusions to sexual violations by the modern Newfoundland descendants of

<sup>19</sup> See John Penry, *A Treatise Containing the Aeqvity of an Humble Svpplication . . . in the behalfe of the Countrey of Wales* (London, 1587), 46; and Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft & Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (London, Melbourne, and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 6ff.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas identifies various intellectual and technological changes as contributing to a decline in belief in various sorts of magic in the early modern period (see especially 641–66). Briggs attributes the quality of W. Y. Evans-Wentz's classic *Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911; rpt. New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1966) to its author's own belief in fairies; when Evans-Wentz set out as late as 1908 to gather folklore from remote Celtic communities, he "encountered believers without a trace of skepticism or condescension, and was therefore given access to experiences and beliefs that would have been withheld from a more sophisticated observer" (*The Vanishing People*, 31). From my perspective on this issue, I would theorize a range of levels of belief among his informants, from simple "faith" to outrageous yarn-spinning, of which Evans-Wentz may not have been entirely aware.

<sup>21</sup> Reginald Scot, *The discoverie of witchcraft* (London, 1584), 153 and 152.

<sup>22</sup> Scot, 85 and 85–86.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas, 611–12.



early modern Irish and English fishermen. These allusions bring into view a use of fairy practices that involved neither naïve acceptance, an unconscious fulfillment of societal needs, nor simple deceit, though all three of these may have been present at times. These references suggest the sophistication and range of the weapons of the weak used by members of subordinated subgroups to forward their own interests. These interests were not always directly opposed to those of more powerful groups. Despite the presence of ongoing social struggle, various strategic interventions, such as fairy practices, sometimes merge the interests of common and dominant cultures to reveal the inadequacies of any simple model of oppression and resistance.

In Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* the Old Shepherd's representation of Perdita as a changeling child left by fairies is part of just such a cross-cultural transaction performed for the mutual benefit of commoners and aristocrats. In this instance the Old Shepherd seems clearly to be referring to fairies as an evasion of the baby Perdita's presumably shameful origin. When the Old Shepherd first finds the exposed baby, he expresses his conviction that she is an illegitimate child:

Sure some scape. Though I am not bookish, yet I can read waiting-gentlewoman in the scape. This has been some stair-work, some trunk-work, some behind-door-work. They were warmer that got this than the poor thing is here. I'll take it up for pity.

(3.3.70–74)

Yet when he presents the baby and the money placed with her to his son, he swerves from this story to describe her as a changeling with fairy gold:

Look thee here; take up, take up, boy. Open 't. So, let's see. It was told me I should be rich by the fairies. This is some changeling. Open 't. What's within, boy? . . . This is fairy gold, boy, and 'twill prove so. Up with 't, keep it close.

(ll. 112–15, 119–20)

The Old Shepherd's attribution of a fairy origin to Perdita functions for Perdita's benefit, his own, and that of her unknown aristocratic mother. Declaring her to be a fairy changeling saves Perdita from lifelong shaming by providing a socially acceptable narrative for her supposed illegitimacy. Declaring the money as "fairy gold," neither earned nor stolen, enables the Old Shepherd to assert his rights to it without further ado. His actual justification lies in the unspoken understanding inherent in these circumstances—that the money represents payment, presumably by the mother, to whichever stranger would rear the infant.

What is the status of the Old Shepherd's fictional explanation? Would his neighbors have "believed" that Perdita was a fairy changeling and that the Shepherd had found fairy gold? Or, rather, would these fairy references disguise a shared understanding of her shameful origin and the real source of the Shepherd's sudden wealth? The Old Shepherd's fairy narrative would seem to represent a speech act

more complex than a statement of literal belief or a simple lie. He has entered upon a sophisticated social transaction that conforms in important respects to what Pierre Bourdieu has called a “white lie,” a distortion or fabrication “socially devised and encouraged” within a group in order to correct “the symbolic effects of strategies imposed by other necessities.”<sup>24</sup> In Bourdieu’s example a family saves its honor from the shame of a disadvantageous marriage by masking constraint as a moral obligation; with the “benevolent complicity” of all concerned, the group creates a “circle of calculated lies” that deceive, and are probably intended to deceive, no one.<sup>25</sup> As a “white lie,” the Old Shepherd’s explanation of Perdita’s origins depends on the assent, more than the literal belief, of members of his community. It is not clear whether the kindly but dim-witted son of the Old Shepherd assents to a white lie or actually believes that Perdita is a changeling. Either response serves the Old Shepherd’s purposes. Years later, however, when the Shepherd’s son as Perdita’s brother fears recriminations from the angry Polixenes, the Clown pleads with his father to deny any kinship: “There is no other way but to tell the King she’s a changeling and none of your flesh and blood” (4.4.690–92). Is the play raising a smile here at the Clown’s expense for his literal belief in fairy changelings? Or, perhaps more likely, in the absence of any reverence for the magical origin of his “changeling” sister, does his matter-of-fact description reveal an understanding (ascribed to Polixenes as well) of a “changeling” identity as a white lie masking an unknown and presumably illegitimate birth?

References from other works strongly suggest the use of fairy euphemisms for found money and sexual acts. A passage from *The Wisdome of Doctor Dodypoll* reveals that the practice of dropping money in a servant’s shoe could reward more than meticulous cleaning. In this anonymous work a manservant named Haunce uses fairy allusions to describe an informal system of bribery which insures his silence about the nighttime visits of his mistress’s wealthy lover:

... I may lie all night tryumphing from corner to corner, while he goes to see the Fayries: but I for my part, see nothing; but here a strange noyse sometimes. Well, I am glad we are haunted so with Fairies: For I cannot set a cleane pump down, but I find a dollar in it in the morning.<sup>26</sup>

Haunce’s sly reference to a “strange,” presumably sexual noise signifies his ribald awareness of the actual nature of the activities performed nightly in his mistress’s bed-chamber. The play represents Haunce as well aware that the young aristocrat who

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977), 43.

<sup>25</sup> Bourdieu, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Anonymous, *The Wisdome of Doctor Dodypoll* (London, 1600), sig. A4<sup>r</sup>.

loves his mistress has nothing at all to do with fairies, that it is he who leaves money in Haunce's shoe. The passage raises the possibility that the euphemism "going to see the fairies" to indicate illicit sexual activities may have been widespread enough to be readily understood by a contemporary audience.

As in *The Winter's Tale*, the transaction between Haunce and his mistress's lover represents a cross-class collaboration in evading the prohibitions of the dominant culture, in this case against premarital sex. For Haunce's mistress the sexual encounter was desired, but in the prose pamphlet *Robin Good-Fellow, His Mad Prankes, and Merry Iests* the desire of a young woman of little means for a wealthy man is less easily determined. A tavern hostess tells of Robin's mother, a "proper young Wench" whose room was repeatedly visited at night by a "hee Fayry" who "forced" her to dance with him, leaving her silver and jewels at his departure.<sup>27</sup> When she became pregnant, his visits ceased. Asked the identity of the father, the hostess replied: "a man that nightly came to visite her, but earely in the morning he would goe his way, whether shee knew not, he went so suddenly."<sup>28</sup> The identity of the father was deduced by an old woman, who told her that "a Fairie had gotten her with child" and comforted her by saying that "the childe must needs be Fortunate, that had so noble a Father as a Fayry was; and should worke many strange wonders."<sup>29</sup> While in this story the father was in fact a fairy, the girl's experience evokes more ordinary and sordid encounters at a time when serving girls were often perceived as fair sexual game by their masters.<sup>30</sup> This sense of fairies as referring to human sexual predators is ascribed to the upper classes in *Cymbeline* with Imogen's bedtime prayer: "To your protection I commend me, gods. / From fairies and the tempters of the night / Guard me, beseech ye" (2.2.8–10). Even as she prays, the treacherous Iachimo is hidden in her trunk, planning if not actually to ravish her, at least to ruin her reputation for chastity.

The sexual deeds performed by the "hee Fayry" and falsely bragged about by Iachimo bear the same signs of human agency as spirits described in the 1665 edition of Reginald Scot's *Discouery of witchcraft*. In fact, later in this passage these "jocund and facetious Spirits" were identified as "Faeries."<sup>31</sup> Attribution of these deeds to fairies or "Spirits" performed the same function of evading sexual prohibitions because spirits were said to sport themselves anonymously "in the night by

<sup>27</sup> Anonymous, *Robin Good-fellow, His Mad Prankes and Merry Iests* (London, 1628), sigs. A4<sup>r-v</sup>; quotations of this work follow the 1639 edition.

<sup>28</sup> *Robin Good-fellow*, sig. A4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> *Robin Good-fellow*, sig. A4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> See Ann Kussmaul, *Servants and Husbandry in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), 44.

<sup>31</sup> Reginald Scot, *The discouerie of witchcraft* (London, 1665), sig. Eee3<sup>r</sup>.

tumbling and fooling with Servants and Shepherds in country houses, pinching them black and blew, and leaving Bread, Butter and Cheese."<sup>32</sup> Sometimes nightly visits escalated to kidnapping and even mutilation, according to this account in Scot's work:

Many such have been taken away by the sayd Spirits, for a fortnight, or month together, being carryed with them in Chariots through the Air, over Hills, and Dales, Rocks and Precipices, till at last they have been found lying in some Meddow or Mountain bereaved of their sences, and commonly of one of their Members to boot.<sup>33</sup>

It is not difficult to understand why a traumatized victim of sexual assault might be unable to identify the assailant; it is even less difficult to understand why victims might fear the repercussions of identifying an aggressor who, if named, might do them further harm. It is not clear from this account, however, who was responsible for attributing these acts to spirits. Did the victims claim that they were wronged by spirits as a sign of their refusal to name the assailant? Or did the persons who found them make this claim to signify that there was no evidence pointing to a specific person? Or was this explanation offered by the victims' families when pressured to explain what had happened to their loved ones? Stretching the boundaries of literal belief, the apparently wide attribution of real and physical harm to "Many such" victims suggests the cooperation of the victims' community in circulating this white lie to protect their members from further harm or perhaps to preserve the reputations of their violated virgins.

Some insight into a very similar white lie attributing assault specifically to fairies is provided by a twentieth-century community in Newfoundland, descended in part from Irish and English fishermen who settled in this area in the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While Burke cautions against the regressive method of studying an earlier cultural phenomenon through its modern version, he does acknowledge the method's utility as a base from which to consider fragmentary evidence from an earlier period, as I am doing here.<sup>34</sup> A recent study by Peter Narváez details how members of the Newfoundland community still attribute to "fairies" deviant behaviors, including "extreme tardiness, premarital sexual acts, infidelity, incest, child molestation, wife battering, and sexual assault."<sup>35</sup> Rather than appealing to a "belief," a woman who claimed she was kidnapped by fairies when she

<sup>32</sup> Scot (1665), sig. Eee3<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> Scot (1665), sig. Eee3<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> See Burke, 80–84.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Narváez, "Newfoundland Berry Pickers 'In the Fairies': Maintaining Spatial, Temporal, and Moral Boundaries Through Legendry" in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, Peter Narváez, ed. (New York: Garland, 1991), 336–68, esp. 357.

missed a turn off the freeway avoided embarrassment by using a culturally sanctioned excuse to refer to what needed to remain unsaid—that she was daydreaming as she drove. Interestingly, her pretext for “lost community time” bears a resemblance to the lost “fortnight, or month together” of the victims described in Scot’s work.<sup>36</sup> This example also evokes early tales of wanderers who returned to their families, or their descendants, years after they had disappeared, claiming that they had been living with the fairies.<sup>37</sup>

Attributions of fairy agency to sexual episodes in the Newfoundland community were particularly frequent in the 1930s, before the use of freezers transformed the local blueberry-picking industry from being low-paying women’s work. One Mary Charles, for example, who strayed while picking berries, was found the next day “only in her bloomers,” her ribs broken, and terrified, claiming “the fairies had beckoned to her.”<sup>38</sup> In a period when women were liable to be blamed for their own rapes while rapists were punished lightly if at all, Mary Charles’s invocation of fairies shielded her from further violence by her attacker and protected her reputation by denying that the act had even occurred. A less fortunate young sister of an informant’s grandmother was taken by the “fairies,” never to return, leaving behind only one red sock and a dipper of blueberries.

The extent to which fairy agency was used to deflect scandal appears in the case of an informant’s aunt. When the local doctor announced that she was pregnant, her brother responded, “No, she isn’t. She was taken by the fairies.”<sup>39</sup> Such a reply makes explicit the role of community assent in the circulation of this white lie. To most readers outside Newfoundland this explanation remains unintelligible. The brother, however, assumed rightly or wrongly that the doctor belonged to a discursive community that understood this reference to fairies as a denial of his sister’s sexual agency. His allusion to fairies represents her as a prey to forces, presumably physical ones, beyond her control. Did the brother’s reply indicate a simple state of stunned denial? Or did his response imply that his sister was a victim of rape, and so this pregnancy wasn’t “real” and should perhaps be terminated? Was termination of “fairy” pregnancies an accepted practice? While Narváez does not report the doctor’s response, the brother’s assumption raises interesting questions. Was this discursive community, as defined by understanding of fairy allusions, centered in a socioeconomic group? Would the doctor’s professional status and education in the sciences have excluded him from such a community? Or would boyhood contact with this community have equipped him to understand the brother’s meaning? The

<sup>36</sup> Narváez, 356.

<sup>37</sup> Briggs, *The Vanishing People*, 15–17.

<sup>38</sup> Narváez, 346.

<sup>39</sup> Narváez, 357.

geographic concentration of this discursive community suggests its determination by location at least as much as by education and class status.

The questions raised by this episode are equally applicable to the early modern period. Since stories of fairy-induced pinches, pregnancies, and even maimings depended on community assent, geography may have played an important role in the early modern period, as well. Who exactly were members of the discursive community circulating fairy allusions? The boyhood perceptions of men such as Aubrey, raised among servants, may have reflected only a partial understanding of the function of white lies. Yet other members of the dominant culture seemed fully able to collaborate in the use of fairy allusions to resist the values and customs of their own group, especially in the case of consensual sexual acts or bribery. Sometimes allusions were not so much collaborative as they were protective of innocent victims—such as raped women or illegitimate babies—who would otherwise suffer shame. While fairy narratives originated in the oral tradition of an agrarian culture, they circulated beyond this group, especially in its interactions with members of other cultures. But how far did they circulate and under what circumstances? Even partial answers to these questions provide a window onto the complex relationships between the common and elite cultures.

While in their very nature, sexual activities blur the binary divisions between members of the common and elite cultures, property theft tended to reinstate these divisions to compensate those persons disadvantaged by an economic system based on personal ownership. Allusions to the fairies in matters of property functioned more explicitly as a weapon of the weak to intervene in the unequal power relationships supported by the juridical systems and values of the dominant culture. Thus, in addition to cover for sexual activities, early moderns also used fairies to refer to forms of social protest ranging from revolt to property crime. This latter use represents an extension of the Old Shepherd's appropriation of the money found with Perdita as "fairy gold" and belonging to no one. In *The Wisdome of Doctor Dodypoll*, Haunce does not believe that fairies left money in his shoe; he also does not believe the alleged fairy origins of a valuable golden cup that a peasant attempts to sell to a jeweler.<sup>40</sup> While the peasant did in fact steal the cup from fairies, this incident suggests that real-life narratives of "fairy gold" expressed a shared understanding concerning stolen goods.

Interpreting the fairy origins of mysterious wealth as a white lie for acts such as bribery or theft restores intelligibility to the following incident noted by John Aubrey:

... There was a labouring-man, that rose up early every day to goe to worke: who for many dayes together found a nine pence in the way that he went. His wife

<sup>40</sup> See *The Wisdome of Doctor Dodypoll*, sig. E3<sup>r-v</sup>.



wondering how he came by so much money, was afraid he gott it not honestly: at last he told her; and afterwards he never found any more.<sup>41</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine the wife's increasing curiosity and then suspicion when, over "many dayes," her husband returned with the fairly substantial sum of nine pence without revealing the source of his extra earnings. Given the associations of fairy magic with other kinds of illicit activity, the wife's fears would seem to be well founded. When her mounting anxiety led her to a direct confrontation, his explanation of fairy beneficence was probably intended not to inspire literal belief but to signify his refusal to identify the actual source. But whether his wife's objections became unpleasant in themselves or endangered his activity by signaling her withdrawal of silent assent, he either ceased the practice or ceased telling his wife about any other sums he "found." Incidents such as this one may explain the folk wisdom that once a mortal discloses gifts of fairy wealth, he forfeits any future gifts. Less calculable in this relation is John Aubrey's own level of belief. As one of the first antiquarians of common culture, Aubrey seems more concerned with recording than interpreting such events. Still, the absence of any reference to an underlying code suggests an ignorance proceeding from the two stages of his relationship with this community. As a child, he was liable to believe stories of fairy gold; as an adult outsider to the group, he was liable to have credited his informant's belief in fairy gold.

If fairy gold is understood as a form of white lie, the actual source of a number of goods bestowed by fairies becomes suddenly vulnerable to suspicion: a golden ball stolen from the fairies as "proof" of visits with them by a twelfth-century boy named Elidurus, as related by Giraldus Cambrensis in his *Itinerary through Wales*; wine stolen by fairies from a lord's cellar, as explained by a boy found drunk there the next morning; a diamond ring mysteriously bestowed by fairies on a wife at a christening.<sup>42</sup> Literal belief in their accounts would have served the purposes of Elidurus, the drunken boy, and the wife. Equally effective was a form of community assent for explanations that implied merely a discreet acceptance of the tellers' refusal to divulge a presumably illegal source. In many cases such discretion may have expressed a community's resistance to a system of property ownership. In these particular cases theft represented not so much a crime as compensation for an inequitable distribution of wealth within a society. Those outside this discursive community, whatever its actual class divisions might have been, would have misunderstood these fairy narratives as false superstitions or wondrous truths. For this reason it is not surprising that con artists such as the Wests found their most gullible victims among the educated bourgeois or middle-class townspeople rather

<sup>41</sup> Aubrey, 203.

<sup>42</sup> These incidents are related in Briggs, *The Vanishing People*, 157 and 48; and Briggs, *Fairies*, 113.

than among the illiterate farmers of the agrarian community, most of whom may have known better.

In commissions of property theft there is sometimes a thin line between personal greed and social protest. Richard Wilson has related two political incidents of subversive fairy allusions from the late-medieval period. In one, Jack Cade's rebels secured an area they called "fairyland" and, in a striking gender inversion, dubbed Cade himself as "Queen of the Fairies."<sup>43</sup> In its self-conscious and blatant absurdity this assertion of a royal identity looks forward to the character Cade's speeches in Shakespeare's *2 Henry VI* in which he pretends a claim to the throne by tracing his lineage to the Mortimers through a fictional twin boy stolen by a beggar woman and raised as a bricklayer (4.2.124–41). The claim by Shakespeare's Cade was designed not so much to inspire literal belief as to parody the lineage of other supposedly serious claims to the throne. In a similar way the historical Cade's superficially absurd assertion of his sovereign right to territory in the name of the queen of the fairies made a serious political point. Cade's pretense parodied the claims of an elite group to exclusive rights to own land. To some disenfranchised citizens these rights undoubtedly seemed just as groundless as those of the fairy queen. As Cade not only referred to fairies but also cast himself as their queen, he was literalizing a figure of speech to legitimate property theft from the wealthy. His defiant use of a familiar figure posed the interests of his group in direct opposition to the interests of those profiting from the contemporary political system. A similar logic structures the second episode, occurring a year later. In 1451 in Kent, William Cheeseman and Tom Crudd "with others unknown . . . and covered with long beards and painted on their faces with black charcoal, calling themselves the servants of the Queen of the Fairies," broke into the duke of Buckingham's preserve and poached ten bucks and seventy-two does.<sup>44</sup> The staging of themselves as servants to the queen of the fairies provided disguises as well as signifying their refusal to divulge their names. It also enacted an underlying ideology that denied the duke's exclusive right to own deer.

How large was a discursive community characterized by the implicit assent of its members in the property crimes represented as bestowal of fairy wealth? Depending on the time and place, it no doubt varied in size from a few members of a band of thieves to a substantial portion of the poor of an entire area. It seems probable that a practice such as this informed Falstaff's naming of his band as "Diana's foresters . . . minions of the moon" (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.25–26). Natalie Zemon Davis has found a larger discursive community among rural peasants in France who protected the

<sup>43</sup> See Wilson, 211–12.

<sup>44</sup> Wilson, 212, quoting F.R.J. Du Boulay, ed., *Kent Records: Documents Illustrative of Medieval Kentish Society* (Ashford, UK: Kent Archaeological Society, 1964), 254–55.

anonymity of rebels sheltered in their cottages by calling them “fairies.”<sup>45</sup> The association of fairies with property theft lingered into the eighteenth century, when the bandits of Connaught were referred to as “fairies.”<sup>46</sup>

As these examples suggest, using fairies as a white lie for property theft was practiced primarily (although not exclusively) by males. The female domain, in the bearing and raising of children, provides a somewhat more complex use of fairy allusions, not all of which necessarily encoded a white lie. According to Minor Latham, narratives explaining various physical changes in infants or even their mysterious deaths were recorded for the first time in the sixteenth century: fairies stole mortal babies and substituted changelings in their place.<sup>47</sup> Such narratives were capable of covering a wide range of very different circumstances, from natural death to culpable accident to intentional murder. It is especially difficult to determine the level of parental or even communal belief given the striking correlations between the described appearance of “changelings” and some actual disorders. The symptoms of the inherited disease phenylketonuria, known as PKU, most common in children of English or Irish descent, begin to appear in normal-looking babies at about six months, leading to slow growth and severe retardation.<sup>48</sup> Joyce Underwood Munro describes the wizened appearance of failure-to-thrive babies, who become “psychosocial dwarves” as a result of “parental hostility” or neglect.<sup>49</sup> Susan Schoon Eberly surmises that children who survived these disfiguring disorders into adulthood may have avoided ridicule and physical persecution by keeping to themselves and, like Robin Goodfellow, performing household chores at night in exchange for a “ritual evening dish of fresh cream.”<sup>50</sup> Many infants, however, did not survive the methods of determining if they were changelings. It was popularly believed that if parents treated their changelings cruelly, the fairies would take the changelings back and return the mortal infants. Traditional methods—such as bathing them in foxglove (an herbal form of digitalis), starving them on a dunghill, or throwing them onto hot coals—were “little more than socially countenanced forms of infanticide.”<sup>51</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1975), 191–92.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Linebaugh, *London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 196.

<sup>47</sup> See Latham, 150; for possible identity and treatment of changeling children, see Briggs, *Fairies*, 117–18; and Latham, 148–62.

<sup>48</sup> See Susan Schoon Eberly, “Fairies and the Folklore of Disability: Changelings, Hybrids and The Solitary Fairy” in Narváez, ed., 227–50.

<sup>49</sup> Joyce Underwood Munro, “The Invisible Made Visible: The Fairy Changeling as a Folk Articulation of Failure to Thrive in Infants and Children” in Narváez, ed., 251–83, esp. 273.

<sup>50</sup> Eberly, 244.

<sup>51</sup> Eberly, 229.

Would early modern parents have believed that their retarded or failure-to-thrive infants were changelings left by the fairies? Or did fairy narratives offer a socially acceptable form of infanticide as a means of managing a situation that seemed, or perhaps actually was, impossible? The use of the changeling narrative to soften the cruel reality of accidental death emerges from an anecdote told by Robert Willis, born about the same time and to the same approximate socioeconomic group as Shakespeare, concerning his own near death in infancy:

Such an accident (by relation of others) befell me within few daies after my birth, whilst my mother lay in of me being her second child, when I was taken out of the bed from her side, and by my suddain and fierce crying recovered again, being found sticking between the beds-head and the wall; and if I had not cryed in that manner as I did, our gossips had a conceit that I had been quite carried away by the Fairies they know not whither, and some elfe or changeling (as they call it) laid in my room.<sup>52</sup>

Willis reveals the circulation of the changeling narrative among women of the “mid-dling” sort, perhaps through a midwife from a less prosperous group. In Willis’s case the term *changeling* would have referred to an actual dead infant, not a living fairy substitute. His use of the word “conceit” indicates his perception that the women or “gossips” attending his mother after childbirth were well aware that his near death had nothing at all to do with fairies. If Willis had died, the fairy narrative would have deflected blame for a terrible accident from the mother and her attendants.

This use of a changeling narrative to deflect blame also appears in Marlowe’s *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. When the nurse temporarily loses the boy Ascanius, the play presents her fairy story as the flimsiest of excuses:

O Dido, your little sonne Ascanius  
Is gone! He lay with me last night,  
and in the morning he was stolne from me,  
I thinke some Fairies have beguiled me!<sup>53</sup>

Marlowe’s play renders the nurse’s hysterical outburst as comic. In fact the loss of children by nurses, whether from such accidents as the one nearly occurring to Willis or from general neglect, reflects a grim actuality.<sup>54</sup> What was the level of acceptance

<sup>52</sup> Robert Willis, *Mount Tabor. or Private Exercises of a Penitent Sinner* (London, 1639), 92–93. Willis’s account is discussed by Briggs, *Anatomy*, 22; and by François Laroque, *Shakespeare’s Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 314.

<sup>53</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Dido, Queen of Carthage* in *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Fredson Bowers, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), 1:6–70, esp. 55 (5.1.212–15).

<sup>54</sup> While Dorothy McLaren argues that the mortality rate for infants sent out to wet-nurses is exaggerated (“Marital Fertility and Lactation, 1570–1720” in *Women in English Society 1500–1800*,

by middle-class or aristocratic mothers of these blame-deflecting narratives circulated by nurses? Narratives of changelings were well enough known in court by the late-sixteenth century for George Puttenham to refer to a figure of speech as a “changeling” because among the “Ladies and pretie mistresses in Court . . . it is a terme often in their mouthes.”<sup>55</sup> Did they, like the Old Shepherd of *The Winter’s Tale*, allude to illegitimate children born to women of the court or to their attendants as “changelings”? An aristocratic mother might have withheld her assent to such a narrative when it came to a nurse’s loss of her own infant. Marlowe stages such a confrontation when his character Dido responds to Ascanius’s nurse by calling her a liar:

O cursed hagge and false dissembling wretch!  
That slayest me with thy harsh and hellish tale,  
Thou for some prettie guift hast let him goe,  
And I am thus deluded of my boy.<sup>56</sup>

Whether offered as evasion or explanation, these narratives required the assent of the community to serve any social function. If Willis had died, the “gossips” would have had to agree to the “changeling” explanation. The surrounding community would have had to assent to this narrative, either as the actual reason or, more likely, as the sign of their refusal to assign blame for the baby’s accidental death. But a community could refuse such assent, as happened as late as 1895 in Ireland, when a young woman named Bridget Cleary was suspected of being a changeling after she fell ill of catarrh and nervous excitement. Over a period of several days her husband and relatives, in order to elicit a confession of her fairy identity, burned her with a hot poker until she died. When they buried her, they claimed she had “gone with the fairies.”<sup>57</sup> But the community did not legitimate this fairy narrative, and, on the testimony of two witnesses, the parties involved were arrested and convicted of murder. A contemporary broadside described the incident in this way: “They said she was a fairy, a spirit or a witch, / and so they cruelly murdered her, and threw her in a ditch.”<sup>58</sup>

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Mary Prior, ed. [London: Methuen, 1985], 22–53, esp. 32), Keith Wrightson asserts the apparent role of specific nurses to “tacitly guarantee” an early death to infants in their keeping (“Infanticide in European History,” *Criminal Justice History* 3 [1982]: 1–20, esp. 12). For more on widespread fears about wet-nursing infants, see Deborah Willis, *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995), 18 and 66.

<sup>55</sup> George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), ed. Gladys Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1936), 173.

<sup>56</sup> Marlowe, 1:55 (5.1.216–19).

<sup>57</sup> Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, “The Fairy Belief and Official Religion in Ireland” in Narváez, ed., 199–214, esp. 209–10.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted here from Ó Giolláin, 210.

The figure of Robin Goodfellow performed a similar discursive task, for, like fairies, he functioned in and around the common culture as a weapon of the weak. Robin Goodfellow was associated with property theft, as is evident in Thomas Harman's description of vagabond "hokers," who intruded a hooked staff through windows to pluck blankets and even garments from their sleeping victims: "When they were well waked with cold," Harman writes, "they suerly thought that Robin Goodfellow (accordinge to the old saying) had bene with them that night."<sup>59</sup> Just as "going with the fairies" accounted for time lost in consensual or forced sexual experiences, Robin Goodfellow served as a proverbial excuse for those who had lost their way for whatever reason. In 1531, William Tyndale used this trope to represent those confused by an unfamiliar Bible: "The scripture is become a maze unto them, in which they wander as in a mist, or (as we say) led by Robin Goodfellow, that they cannot come to the right way, no, though they turn their caps."<sup>60</sup> While Tyndale seems to be stressing the difficulties of barely literate readers still immersed in the practices of a common culture, his reference also suggests that allusions to Robin Goodfellow circulated among literate members of the middling sort.

Unlike fairies, however, Robin Goodfellow did not traditionally play a role in the theft of mortal babies or as a direct participant in sexual episodes. Instead his primary role appears to have been the performance of particularly onerous household tasks. Scot mentions grinding mustard and sweeping in exchange for a bowl of milk. The ballad "Mad merry pranks of Robbin Good-Fellow" also mentions dressing and spinning of rough hemp fibers, an unpleasant task particularly damaging to women's hands.<sup>61</sup> His association with hemp appears in his conventional outburst, recorded by Scot: "What have we here? Hempton hamten, here will I never more tread nor stampen."<sup>62</sup> Part of the Goodfellow narrative involves his expression of outrage when well-wishers leave out clothing to cover his nakedness. The second part of the ballad portrays this relative nakedness; he is clothed in animal pelts down to his upper thighs with his legs left bare. This costume of animal skins is consistent with Eberly's suggestion that persons cast out because of retardation or disfiguring congenital disorders could become "solitary fairies" or "rough men" who

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Harman, *A Caveat or Warning, for Commen Cursetors Vulgarely Called Vagabones* (London, 1567), 37.

<sup>60</sup> William Tyndale, "The Prologue to the Exposition of the First Epistle of Saint John" (1531), quoted here from Gillian Edwards, *Hobgoblin and Sweet Puck: Fairy Names and Natures* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1974), 138.

<sup>61</sup> Anonymous, "The mad merry pranks of Robbin Good-Fellow" (c. 1600), quoted here from *The Roxburghe Ballads*. Vol. 2, William Chappell, ed. (Hertford, UK: Stephen Austin for the Ballad Society, 1872), 83.

<sup>62</sup> Scot, 85; see also *Robin Good-fellow*, sig. C2<sup>v</sup>.



did chores in exchange for cream.<sup>63</sup> The association of such rough men with Robin Goodfellow follows naturally to imply a real social genesis for this folk figure. If bowls of milk were actually drunk and burdensome tasks actually performed, then leaving out food for Robin Goodfellow in exchange for labor may have referred to a practice rather than a superstition.



Figure 1: Woodcut illustration from Volume 2, part 1, of *The Roxburghe Ballads* (1872), 60. Reproduced courtesy of the Morris Library, Southern Illinois University.

Like fairies, the figure of Robin Goodfellow could function in a variety of roles. In both the ballad “The mad merry pranks of Robin Good-Fellow” and the prose pamphlet *Robin Good-fellow, His Mad Prankes and Merry Iests* he performs the role of trickster, expressing joy in his pranks with his signature laugh, “ho ho ho.” However, as with any trickster, the perspective on Robin Goodfellow reflects the onlookers’ level of identification with the victim or even their perception of who the true victim might be. When his pranks, circulating in an oral culture, were written down and published for

<sup>63</sup> See Eberly, 242–46.

a wider audience, they became subject to reinterpretation and manipulation according to the ideologies of various social groups, including that of the dominant culture.

The first part of “Mad merry pranks” presents Goodfellow in his traditional activities—misleading travelers, shapeshifting, grinding malt, and spinning hemp. Perhaps under the influence of works such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the second part conflates his activities with those conventionally performed by fairies—pinching maidens, stealing newborn babies, and singing with the fairy king and queen. The competing interpretations of Goodfellow appear most clearly in the figures prefacing the two parts of the ballad. In the first image (fig. 1), associations



Figure 2: Woodcut illustration from Volume 2, part 1, of *The Roxburghe Ballads* (1872), 81. Reproduced courtesy of the Morris Library, Southern Illinois University.

with petty theft and con artistry account for the cards, dice, and rabbit (or cony) representing the con artist’s mark. As described above, the second image portrays a figure barely clothed in animal pelts (fig. 2). This pairing suggests the adaptation of an agrarian figure to a primarily urban or village scene of crime in order to denote an alternative form of anonymous nighttime labor, much like that recorded by Harman. The rabbits import into the Goodfellow narrative an instability of perspective toward con games (shared with Robert Green’s cony-catching pamphlets), in which an initially sanctimonious tone yields to an amoral delight in the escapades of clever con men. The images of two conies—one hooking garments from outside

a window and another holding playing cards—were in fact taken from title pages of Greene's pamphlets; and a similar instability emerges from the juxtaposition of these delightful conies with a somber gallows prominently placed at the upper left-hand corner to evoke the grim consequences of con games.<sup>64</sup> To complicate the perspective further, the presence of a maypole to the right of the gallows associates these scenes of Goodfellow trickery with seasonal folk festivities.

The images prefacing the two parts of *Robin Good-fellow, His Mad Prankes and Merry Iests* reveal the pamphlet's own contradictory constructions of Robin Goodfellow as a sign circulating among competing ideologies. The pamphlet's title page depicts a rough and hairy devil figure or satyr with cloven hoofs, erect penis, horns, and animal ears dancing within a circle of smaller human figures wearing hats (see cover). The second image portrays a stocky, bare-chested huntsman (fig. 3).<sup>65</sup> With his legs spread wide and his arms held out from his body, he appears physically vigorous and ready for action rather than dangerous or even potentially demonic. This simple huntsman figure demystifies the nonhuman aspects of the first image, to suggest that Robin Goodfellow is only an ordinary man whose pranks are more liable to inspire laughter than fear. These significations are further destabilized by the competing valuations of the devil figure. To the middling sort the cloven hoofs, erect penis, and horns identify Robin Goodfellow as an embodiment of evil. From the Puritan perspective, any supernatural creature not sent by God was satanic in nature.<sup>66</sup> But other associations were also circulating in early modern culture. Weimann observes that references to Robin Goodfellow as a devil in plays such as *Grim the Collier of Croyden* represent "playful euphemisms for his non-Christian origin" rather than a sense of innate evil.<sup>67</sup> At times the devil figure

<sup>64</sup> The rabbit with the cards appears on the title page of Robert Greene, *A Notable Discovery of Coosnage* (London, 1591), while the rabbit hooking garments through the window appears on the title page of Greene's *The Second and last part of Conny-catching* (London, 1591).

<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Gil Harris ably analyzes this representation of Goodfellow as a huntsman in his "Puck/Robin Goodfellow" in *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History: A bio-bibliographical source-book*, Vicki K. Janik, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998). For material on Goodfellow, see Latham, 219–62; Briggs, *Anatomy*, 23–26 and 40; Thomas, 606–14; and Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), 192–96. Wendy Wall is also currently at work on immensely interesting material on this topic.

<sup>66</sup> In medieval and early modern literature Robin Goodfellow was associated with Satan, according to Latham, 219, 224–25, and 243–44; and Jonathan Gil Harris, 358. Weimann traces his signatory "ho ho ho" to the Vice of medieval mystery plays, noting, however, that as the "good-natured servant of Oberon," Shakespeare's Puck was "clearly not a Vice figure" and in fact shows the influence of the classical Cupid (194–96). For the demonic associations of all supernatural creatures, including fairies, see Keith Sagar, "A *Midsummer Night's Dream*: A Marriage of Heaven and Hell," *Critical Survey* 7.1 (1995): 34–43.

<sup>67</sup> Weimann, 193.



Figure 3: Frontispiece from *Robin Good-Fellow, His Mad Prankes, and merry Iests . . .* (1628). Reproduced by kind permission of The Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery

functioned as a sign of common festivity or even resistance to the values of dominant culture. Names such as “Beelzebub” and “Little Devil Doubt,” recorded for mummers of a later date, suggest the community’s capacity to appropriate negative associations with the devil and to revalue them as positive.<sup>68</sup> According to Weimann, antlers and animal ears sometimes formed part of a mummer’s costume.<sup>69</sup> To some audiences, then, Robin Goodfellow’s head ornaments, together with the dancing circle, may have evoked the early modern mummer, whose rowdy and obscene performances represented an important site of contest over the proper display and mode of control of the human body within the dominant culture as well as over property ownership.

<sup>68</sup> See E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), 214–16 and 258. Alan Brody records a 1685 description of a mumming event, already an “ancient pastime” in the author’s childhood, which includes Beelzebub and a little devil who used a broom to gather up money (*The English Mummers and Their Plays: Traces of Ancient Mystery* [Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1970], 11).

<sup>69</sup> Weimann, 31; see also Laroque, 48.

Some of Robin's "mad pranks," such as kissing a weaver's wife and transforming himself into a bear in order to have a large posset all to himself, fulfill bodily pleasures in sex and food. A number of other pranks, however, reinterpret "devil" to represent a hero who rights the wrongs suffered by the powerless and the poor. Robin Goodfellow tricks an old lecher into permitting a young maid to marry her beloved. He saves a young maiden from rape by transforming himself into a horse to carry away a lecherous gallant. He becomes a raven and then a ghost to terrify a wicked usurer into liberality. He reforms a tapster who cheats his customers by using small drinking pots. In these episodes Robin Goodfellow's actions reflect a strategy, no doubt originating in the stories circulating within an oral culture, for changing what James C. Scott has called the "climate of opinion" in order to provide some redress for groups whose needs and complaints did not dependably find remedy through early modern institutions.<sup>70</sup>

Authors and publishers attempting to sell pamphlets would not look for buyers among young maidens, country housemaids, vagabonds, con artists, or other such groups served by practices associated with Robin Goodfellow. Greater literacy, as well as more disposable income, could be found in other groups, particularly in the rising "middling sort." The ideological pressure exerted on the book trade by a market of pious readers reveals itself in a remarkable manipulation of the Robin Goodfellow narrative. Toward the end of the second part of *Robin Good-fellow, His Mad Prankes and Merry Iests*, Robin sings "civill and vertuous Songs" at "mens windows and doores."<sup>71</sup> As this first of four verses of Goodfellow's song urges listeners to control their lusts, it directly contradicts the robust and very physical values of much of the pamphlet:

If thou wilt lead a blest and happy life,  
I will describe the perfect way:  
First must thou shun all cause of mortall strife,  
    Against thy lust continually to pray.  
    Attend unto Gods word,  
    Great comforts 'twill afford,  
    'Twill keepe thee from discord,  
    Then trust in God thy Lord:  
        for ever,  
        for ever,  
And see in this thou persever.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>70</sup> James C. Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance" in *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Forrest D. Colburn, ed. (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1989), 22–23.

<sup>71</sup> *Robin Good-fellow*, sig. E2<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>72</sup> *Robin Good-fellow*, sig. E2<sup>v</sup>.

This text reaches an unusual level of dissonance in its representation of this pious advice as a prank. When the listeners would open up their windows or doors, this singer of devout songs would “runne away laughing, ho, ho, hoh.”<sup>73</sup> The compiler’s attempt to smooth over the glaring inconsistency of this song with the traditional narratives of Robin Goodfellow only makes the contradiction between ideologies more comically obvious.

Gender issues further complicate the ideological configuration of *Robin Goodfellow, His Mad Prankes and Merry Iests* as the pamphlet concludes with a reference to its own initial framing device. These stories of Robin Goodfellow have been told by a tavern hostess to a tired traveler as her frivolous explanation that the people of that county were called “long tayles” because their “Tayles are long that we use to passe the time withall, and make our selves merry.”<sup>74</sup> The garrulous female narrator of trivial tales represents an almost uniform element of the Robin Goodfellow narratives. The ballad “Mad merry prankes” also ends with a reference to women narrators: “And beldams old / My feats have told, / So vale, vale, ho ho ho.” *Tarleton’s Newes Out of Purgatorie* places Robin Goodfellow in the “buttery,” describing him as “famozed in every olde wives chronicle.”<sup>75</sup> As noted above, Reginald Scot describes “our mothers maids” as frightening himself and his readers with “bugs” such as fairies and Robin Goodfellow.

The almost obsessive emphasis on a female narrator, often an elderly female, represents a crucial signifying element of this oral tradition. This is not to claim that only women told tales. While some of the activities, particularly the fairies’ theft of infants and Goodfellow’s carding of hemp, take place in the domestic realm, men were undoubtedly as numerous and as active as women, especially within those groups most likely to commit property theft. Only men are represented as disguising themselves as “fairies” to poach deer. Accounts more often record the involvement of men than of women in discoveries of “fairy gold” and in other forms of theft. Thus the figure of the female narrator reflects the act of narration itself. Since garrulity was (and is) considered a female attribute, the choice of “beldams old” as narrators enables the telling, and the receiving, of tales supposed to be devoid of the more serious purpose appropriate to masculine narrators.<sup>76</sup> Perhaps more important, however, such attribution also reflects a specific

<sup>73</sup> *Robin Good-fellow*, sig. E3<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>74</sup> *Robin Good-fellow*, sig. A4<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>75</sup> *Tarleton’s Newes Out of Purgatorie* (London, 1590), sig. A2<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>76</sup> Juliet Fleming has made this argument to explain the apparently trivial content of prose romances addressed to women at this time; see “The ladies’ man and the age of Elizabeth” in *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, James Grantham Turner, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 158–81. Giovanni Boccaccio represents as without merit or meaning the stories of “a maundering old woman, sitting with others late of a winter’s night at the home fireside, making up tales of Hell,



circumstance of the narrative act which is tremendously significant in the reception of common culture. As the primary caretakers of children, women—especially rural or lower-class women—were the primary transmitters of common culture to the children who would grow up to write pamphlets, plays, and other literary works. To many adult males who transcribed narratives of fairies and Robin Goodfellow, the space of this common culture was occupied mainly by women and the children these authors once were. In this space was practiced the most productive interaction between members of the common culture and those who would become members of more powerful social groups. For writers such as John Aubrey this space was left behind but never forgotten when they entered the schoolroom to be educated in the values and Latin texts of the learned or “great” culture.<sup>77</sup>

## II

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* was subject to conflicting ideological pressures similar to those shaping the prose pamphlet *Robin Good-fellow, His Mad Prankes and Merry Iests*. As numerous people, including Shakespeare himself, gravitated to London from small towns and farms, some practices circulating around Robin Goodfellow became part of urban life. Robin Goodfellow's association with property theft was readily accommodated to an urban milieu. Other practices, such as leaving out a bowl of cream, were less easily assimilated. Both the pamphlet and the play retain aspects of the original Robin as a country prankster. But neither functions primarily to transmit oral traditions. As the pamphlet's preposterous attribution of a pious song to Robin Goodfellow suggests, a gap was opening up between the values deriving from Robin's country origin and those held by the devout readers of an increasingly urban middling sort. Not as evidently influenced by a growing population of devout readers, Shakespeare's Robin Goodfellow did not sing godly songs against lustful desires.<sup>78</sup> In what was perhaps as violent an appropriation, however, Shakespeare transformed the rude and hairy Robin into a smooth and courtly Puck, obedient servant to his fairy king. The social functions performed by Robin Goodfellow and the fairies extended outward to take on new and unfamiliar purposes. For many members of Shakespeare's audience the original subversive practices no longer represent-

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the fates, Ghosts, and the like" (*Boccaccio on Poetry*, ed. Charles Osgood [New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956], 54).

<sup>77</sup> I expand this argument and apply it to other plays by Shakespeare in "Engendering the Narrative Act: Old Wives' Tales in *The Winter's Tale*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*," *Criticism* 40 (1998): 529–54.

<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, the fairies in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* sing just such a song against "lust and luxury" (5.5.93–103).

ed an integral part of their lived experience as adults in London. Instead the distance between Shakespeare's London audience and most practitioners of weapons of the weak enabled the creation of fairies and of Robin Goodfellow as signs not only of subversive strategies but, even more, as signs grouping together the various practitioners of those strategies as one culture. By engaging in the conceptualization of a popular culture, defined within a mutually constitutive relationship with a more elite culture, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* represents a precondition for the denigration and eventual rejection of popular culture as vulgar by the eighteenth century. But in the late-sixteenth century a clean and simple rejection was not yet possible.

When considered in isolation, the forest episodes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* stage meanings for the fairies and for Robin Goodfellow which are not yet substantially different from their meanings within a common culture. The play literalizes the strategic use of fairy allusions as a cover for acts regarded as illicit by the dominant culture. Bottom's adventure with Titania stages precisely what fairy allusions functioned to evoke, in this case a socially unacceptable sexual union between an artisan and an upper-class woman. But allusions to these figures also structure the young lovers' plot. In opposition to Athens, the English forest is a world of desire rather than law; and it is there that Hermia and Lysander flee to find refuge from a patriarchal society that would deny them their choice of marriage partner. It is there that Helena and Demetrius are propelled by their own erotic longings. The roles played by Oberon and by Puck, who refers to himself as Robin Goodfellow, in the lovers' wanderings make literal a popular figure of speech. Since going to "see the Fayries" refers to illicit sexual encounters, then the lovers are indeed going to "see the fairies"; that they do *not* see any fairies may register their own upper-class ignorance of this homely metaphor. The fairy ointment Puck rubs on Lysander's eyelids alludes to what need not be directly stated: that his love for Hermia cooled as she denied him the illicit sexual pleasure he desired. Demetrius's threat to do Helena "mischief in the wood" (2.1.237) evokes the more sinister acts of sexual assault performed in fairy-haunted forests. Here the absence of either willing or forced sexual congress between the aristocratic couples represents a striking intervention of bourgeois mores in the conventional outcome of fairy narratives.

The forest episodes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* capture another cultural significance circulating around fairy lore and the pranks of Robin Goodfellow, one that played a crucial role in the separation of the middle and upper classes from the common culture. In the childhood memories of upper-class males such as John Aubrey, common culture was transmitted primarily by female caretakers.<sup>79</sup> Thus

<sup>79</sup> These women were often nurses from a nonelite group: see Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 83–86. The cultural implications

while Bottom's tryst with the fairies literalizes a white lie signifying an illicit sexual encounter, Titania's relationship with Bottom also evokes distinctly maternal elements. Bottom literally takes the place of the changeling child in Titania's affections, and the implications of this substitution for an infantilized Bottom have been well discussed by critics such as Gail Kern Paster, Louis Montrose, Meredith Anne Skura, and Allen Dunn.<sup>80</sup> Her maternal domination introduces quite another form of engagement with common culture. Within this exotic forest world, aspects of a culture readily shared with children emerge from the fairies' evocation of the lived reality of the most ordinary of events. Paster's reading of purging practices in the Bottom-Titania episodes affirms to a startling degree the extent to which "Titania's mastery and Bottom's passivity" replicate "the structure of the early childhood experience of the body."<sup>81</sup> Caretakers also often attended to minor childhood injuries, and Bottom immediately associates the fairy Cobweb with the cobwebs applied to cut fingers for healing. The devouring of Master Mustardseed's kindred by a "cowardly, giantlike ox-beef" (3.2.187) amusingly transforms an everyday meal into a folk narrative of a kind especially appealing to children. William Wager's play *The longer thou livest* describes the homely task of grinding mustardseed as one shared by women and small children, who also learned ballads in the process.<sup>82</sup>

Folktales specialist Ruth Bottigheimer has discussed the fairy tale as among "the deepest and most enduring childhood impressions" because it is the "first poetic

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of this practice are discussed by Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993), 215–30, esp. 227. Anthony Fletcher quotes the marquis of Halifax's declaration to his daughter that "the first part of our life is a good deal subjected to you in the nursery, where you reign without competition" (*Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500–1800* [New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1995], 297). Hilda Geertz has noted that beliefs in which "we are brought up from childhood" gain a "plausibility" through "the sheer force of culture" (79).

<sup>80</sup> See Paster, 135–43; Montrose, 170–71; and Meredith Anne Skura, *Shakespeare the Actor and the Purposes of Playing* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993), 106–14. Allen Dunn takes a more psychoanalytic approach in his "The Indian Boy's Dream Wherein Every Mother's Son Rehearses His Part: Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Studies* 20 (1988): 15–32. The implications of this transition from Titania's embrace to Oberon's service for the changeling boy are ably discussed by Montrose, whose description of the fairy plot as taking the boy from the relatively androgynous or feminized state of infancy into the world particularly resonates with the child-rearing patterns of the early modern era (124–50).

Since they belong neither to the classical Athenian nor to the English fairy worlds, Bottom and the other artisans complicate this study; these characters are discussed extensively in my larger work-in-progress, *Fairies, Old Wives, and Mummers in Sidney, Shakespeare, and Spenser*.

<sup>81</sup> Paster, 138.

<sup>82</sup> See William Wager, *A very merry and pythie commedie, called The longer thou liuest, the more foole thou art* (London, 1569), 40.

form with which people come into contact.”<sup>83</sup> The sharing of fairy tales between women and children lies at the heart of the forest episodes of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Mirroring the tendency of children to blur boundaries between real people and fictional characters, the magically powerful fairy queen merges with the magically powerful women who tell her stories. The fairy queen of this forest enacts a glamorized version of the early modern caretaker who tells fairy stories to the children in her charge until she must give them up. Rather than directly evoking an earlier experience, however, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* views common culture through the eyes of one who lives there no longer. Through the substitution of Bottom for the changeling in Titania’s arms, the forest episodes stage the absurd-yet-compelling fantasy of a return to a female-dominated space of magic and beauty. As described eloquently by Montrose, this “world in which the relationship between women has displaced the relationship between wife and husband” conveys “an experience of female fecundity” which poses “a lyrical counterstatement to paternal and patriarchal claims.”<sup>84</sup> Bottom’s return violates a principle that was simultaneously social and maturational, for it was in the nature of this experience that it was transitory, as boys moved “from the relatively androgynous or feminized state of infancy into the more decisively gendered state of youth, from the world of mothers and nurses into the world of fathers and masters.”<sup>85</sup> This movement itself encodes a binary: androgynous infancy versus decisively gendered youth, mothers versus fathers, nurses versus masters. This binary was imposed with particular intensity on early modern boys privileged, usually by social status, to enter the “great tradition” of classical learning. Between the ages of eight and ten these boys entered the schoolroom to learn Latin under conditions ranging from ascetic to abusive.<sup>86</sup> However this transition may have been managed, a boy’s withdrawal from common culture represented not only a leave-taking but a rejection. Implicit in the humanist pedagogy of the early modern schoolroom was the deliberate repression of common culture, particularly as transmitted by women. As Richard Halpern has pointed out, “education by means of a classical curriculum was designed in part to alienate youth from more spontaneous forms of popular learning,” including tales told by women.<sup>87</sup> Walter Ong has argued that a central project of the schoolroom was in fact to instill an early modern form of masculinity through rigorous routines, ascetic living, and cor-

<sup>83</sup> Ruth Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1986), 1.

<sup>84</sup> Montrose, 138–39.

<sup>85</sup> Montrose, 125.

<sup>86</sup> The disciplines and daily life in early modern schools are well described in T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakespeare’s Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*, 2 vols. (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1944), 1:353–72.

<sup>87</sup> Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991), 25.

poral punishment.<sup>88</sup> While scholars such as Rebecca Bushnell and Alan Stewart may differ as to the extent of the actual beatings, few would take serious exception to Ong's basic point.<sup>89</sup> In this context the reading of classical literature formed part of a process of separating from a common culture of childhood, leading to its eventual rejection. Erasmus poses this rejection of the dangerous influence of female caretakers on boys specifically in terms of fairy tales:

A boy [may] learn a pretty story from the ancient poets, or a memorable tale from history, just as readily as the stupid and vulgar ballad, or the old wives' fairy rubbish such as most children are steeped in nowadays by nurses and serving women.<sup>90</sup>

Articulating a profound competition between the cultures of the schoolroom and that of early childhood, Erasmus represents the displacement of "fairy rubbish" by classical literature as exerting determinative effects on the subjectivity of boys. This competition gives contemporary meaning to the strikingly disjunctive settings in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The seemingly insuperable distance between an early modern English forest and classical Athens was traversed in a very short period of time by many boys who left their childhood caretakers for schoolmasters, the hearing of fairy tales for the reading of classical narratives. Tales of the arguments between a fairy king and his queen, stories of human infants replaced with fairy changelings, lullabies to protect sleepers from snakes and hedgehogs: all these are part of the "old wives' fairy rubbish" to be left behind. "Pretty stories" from "ancient poets," as well as ancient histories not easily distinguished from these stories, are appropriately located in classical Athens. The name of Theseus invites educated audience members to identify him with the mythical character who left "Perigenia,

<sup>88</sup> See Walter Ong, "Latin Language Study as a Renaissance Puberty Rite," *Studies in Philology* 56 (1959): 103–24. See also Fletcher, 87. Keith Thomas, in *Rule and Misrule in the Schools of Early Modern England* (Reading: U of Reading, 1976), discusses the routines and disciplines of early modern schooling as designed to induce in boys an "instinctual renunciation" of bodily appetites, while occasional "barrings out" of the schoolmaster formed a periodic release from the tensions of this regimen (8).

<sup>89</sup> See Rebecca Bushnell, *A Culture of Teaching: Early Modern Humanism in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1996), 62; and Alan Stewart, *Close Readers: Humanism and Sodomy in Early Modern England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1997), 84–121. Humanist education in fact promoted homosocial and homosexual desire. Bushnell discusses cultural ambivalence toward the schoolmaster's disciplinary powers (23–72), and Alan Stewart notes that "the achievement of humanism lies precisely in the social relations that it facilitates, maintains, and transforms . . . between men" (xx). See also Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A cultural poetics* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991), 79–115.

<sup>90</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *De pueris statim ac liberaliter instituendis* (1529), quoted here from William Harrison Woodward, *Desiderius Erasmus concerning the Aim and Method of Education* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1904), 180–222, esp. 214.

whom he ravished," broke faith not only with "fair Aegles" but with Ariadne and Antiopa as well (2.1.78–80) before he married the famous Amazon Hippolyta.

While Athens does not represent a schoolroom, these characters evoke the classical narratives that were taught there. Just as the maternal figure of the fairy queen conflates the teller with the tale, the setting in Athens also conflates classical myth with myth's early modern consumers: those wealthy middle and upper classes who had attained, or who aspired to attain, the classical knowledge engaged by references to ancient Athens. The family problems in Athens would have seemed quite familiar to a wealthy early modern family, where intergenerational strife revolving around marriage choices was widespread. This was a world possessed of sufficient revenues to cause impatience in the sons of aging dowagers (1.1.5). This was the world of lavish weddings and enough money to hire players for entertainment. The location of this world in a specifically classical setting, divided from the fairy forest in time and space, expresses the urge to separate from the common culture, although this urge was rendered impossible to satisfy by the two cultures' inextricable entanglements.

The binary division evoked by the competing narratives of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* differs in one highly significant respect from the Erasmian privileging of classical myth over "old wives' fairy rubbish." *A Midsummer Night's Dream* stages its fairies and Robin Goodfellow as full counterparts of figures drawn from classical myth. This equivalence would be especially apparent in productions doubling the roles of Theseus and Oberon, as well as those of Hippolyta and Titania. The fairies' influence over the lovers and Bottom is as great or greater than the influence of the classical figures. Moreover, Shakespeare's decision to draw the name of his fairy queen Titania from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* blurs the line between common and learned cultures to suggest an equivalence in their social value. This equivalence becomes explicit in Theseus's dismissal of the lovers' stories: "I never may believe / These antique fables nor these fairy toys" (5.1.2–3). With their elegant language, their willing servants, their courtly manners even in domestic quarrels, Shakespeare's fairies have become the social equals of aristocrats. Even Robin Goodfellow, in his persona as Puck, would not be out of place as an Elizabethan courtier. The implications of this hybridization of fairy narratives may be profound. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White point out, new combinations in a semiotic system generate the possibility "of shifting the very terms of the system itself, by erasing and interrogating the relationships that constitute it."<sup>91</sup> According to Theseus, "antique fables" do not differ significantly from the "fairy toys" of oral culture (5.1.3). As naming a fairy queen Titania dignifies "old wives' fairy rubbish" with

<sup>91</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1986), 58.



classical precedent, so it may also lay open to question the social distinction of Ovidian myth as cultural capital.

In the process of unsettling social categories at the foundation of Elizabethan hierarchy, however, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also dulls the edges of fairy allusions as weapons of the weak. In moving from a common culture to the stage, Shakespeare's fairies underwent a significant transformation. As Latham observes, Shakespeare's fairies bore little resemblance to traditional fairies, who were "tyrannical and dangerous beings, even in their jokes."<sup>92</sup> Fairies were typically described as the size of children or even adults.<sup>93</sup> By describing them as small enough to "creep into acorn cups" (2.1.30), the play popularizes a tradition that literally takes away the fleshliness of their bodies, rendering them the ethereal figures of later centuries. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* diminishes their dangerous power by portraying them not only as tiny but as uncharacteristically benevolent. The play's attribution to Titania, for example, of an "affectionate motive" in rearing the changeling child out of love for her mother was unique to Shakespeare's play.<sup>94</sup> Identifying himself as Robin Goodfellow (2.1.34), Shakespeare's elegant Puck civilized contemporary versions of that rough creature who laughed a hearty "ho ho ho" at pranks that were not always so funny to their victims.

In these transformations *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has adapted the figures of a common culture to conform to ideologies of the dominant groups that composed its primary audiences. These figures have been prettified to please an aesthetic taste alien from the often-crude elements of folk art. The more refined aesthetic legitimates the social hierarchies otherwise blurred by the play's equivalencies between fairy and classical figures. As Pierre Bourdieu has argued at length, "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier," often along lines of social status.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, the fairies are now politically contained. Until the last scene, when their decorous dances bless the bridebeds of aristocratic marriages, fairies are neatly confined to their own forest world, to work their power only on those Athenians who choose to travel there. Graceful and well-

<sup>92</sup> Latham, 136.

<sup>93</sup> Latham's claim that Shakespeare's representation of tiny fairies was "as new as it was unusual" (192) has been countered by Briggs, who cites the tiny Portunes represented by Gervase of Tilbury (*Fairies*, 3) and also small fairies in the medieval romance folktale *Huon of Bordeaux* (*Anatomy*, 14 and 45). Briggs also attributes the early modern literary use of fairies "for delight and ornament" to a decline in belief in their sinister powers (*Anatomy*, 18). Sagar argues that Shakespeare made his fairies small to counteract his audience's fears proceeding from their anti-Christian origins (37). The changes in Shakespeare's fairies from native tradition have been well noted by Latham (176–218) and by most editors of this play.

<sup>94</sup> Briggs, *Anatomy*, 46.

<sup>95</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984), 6.

meaning to mortals, they finally pose no social or political threat. The unions of the lovers who flee to their forest are eventually legitimated by marriages in Athens. Even within the forest, patriarchy is restored as Oberon overcomes Titania's brief rebellion against his wishes, and she complies with his request to "rock the ground" with him in a dance (5.1.85).<sup>96</sup> In these deviations from the conventional uses of fairy allusions, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* constructs a popular culture in the image desired by a dominant group: no longer coarse, no longer dangerous, no longer a significant threat to established social institutions because it is separate. In this way the binaries set into motion by the disjunctive settings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in classical Athens and in an English forest perform a conservative function. They underlie an early modern reproduction of popular culture, at once the by-product of and a contributing factor to the separation preparatory to withdrawal.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* also resists this separation by demonstrating its impossibility. The play's unlikely conflation of a priapic Robin Goodfellow with a courtly and Cupid-like Puck would seem to obliterate a subversive folk source to suit an aristocratic agenda.<sup>97</sup> Puck aligns himself with monarchical values in his obedience to Oberon, in the courtly self-deprecation of his Epilogue, and especially in the snobbishness of his initial response to the artisans: "What hempen homespuns have we swaggering here / So near the cradle of the Fairy Queen?" (3.1.72–73). Yet Puck's scorn for the artisans' hempen elicits the memory of his own homely origin. Even his phrase "hempen homespuns" echoes Robin Goodfellow's traditional refrain of "hempen hampen" as he labored vigorously at night.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, even small, kind fairies cannot entirely shake loose all traces of their originals' more sinister nature. Their dangerous power briefly rises to awareness in the catastrophic natural consequences of the debate between Titania and Oberon (2.1.81–117). Puck's eerie portrayal of the fairies' nighttime visit to the ducal palace unsettles Oberon's claim to be "spirits of a different sort" (3.2.388), that is, different from those who must disappear at dawn; as owls' screeching reminds mortals of ghosts gliding out of gaping graves, fairies "that do run by the triple Hecate's team" shun the "presence of the sun" to "frolic" in the darkness (5.1.379–81). Replicating

<sup>96</sup> Skiles Howard describes Oberon's invitation to "rock the ground" as referring to a courtly dance that "formalized the distinction between common and gentle, those who worked with their hands and those who did not" ("Hands, Feet, and Bottoms: Decentering the Cosmic Dance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 [1993]: 325–42, esp. 328–29, and 335). She further notes that "the dance of Titania and Oberon articulates the subordination of the popular culture to a patriarchal elite" (335).

<sup>97</sup> See Weimann, 196; and Jonathan Gil Harris, 358.

<sup>98</sup> See Maureen Duffy, *The Erotic World of Faery* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), 149; and Clifford Davidson, "'What hempen home-spuns have we swaggring here?' Amateur Actors in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Coventry Civic Plays and Pageants," *ShStud* 19 (1987): 87–99.

their originals' function to evoke rather than state, Shakespeare's fairies bring to awareness the darker aspects that their unusual benevolence to the Athenian lovers goes to such lengths to deny. This benevolence is crucial to the upper-class society of Athens. As the fairy court penetrates the ducal palace to bless the marriage bed, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* attests to the dependence of an aristocratic culture on the good will of a common culture for its own continued existence.

The separation of early modern gentry from a common culture represents, finally, a forgetting or even a repression of childhood experiences, powerfully evoked by the fairy tales so condemned by Erasmus. The impossibility of this repression appears in *Dream's* own primal scene of narration, the "old wives' tale" briefly described by Puck:

The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,  
 Sometimes for three-foot stool mistaketh me;  
 Then slip I from her bum, down topples she,  
 And "Tailor" cries, and falls into a cough;  
 And then the whole choir hold their hips and laugh,  
 And waxen in their mirth, and neeze, and swear  
 A merrier hour was never wasted there.

(2.1.51–57)

This passage makes visible both the attraction and the threat of this scene of narration. The attraction lies in the communal spirit of this mixed gathering, their readiness to laugh, their enormous capacity for pleasure. Within this fellowship lies a sense of full embodiedness, as in these few lines the members of this company hold their hips, laugh, and sneeze. The old aunt coughs, probably to cover a fart as she falls from her supposed stool.<sup>99</sup> In the happy amusement thus provoked lies an intimacy, a sense of connectedness with each other and with their own bodies, increasingly rare in the polite societies of the self-consciously literate.

The communal merriment of the company was not, however, the same form of merriment as Puck's. Puck's disguising of himself as a stool and then slipping from the aunt's bum was, like his other pranks, malicious and designed to humiliate. What is the function of Puck's unmotivated malice as he stages this scene of humiliation? Even though Puck refers both to the narrator and to her narration with admiration and even respect—she is the "wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale"—he directs attention to his own (invisible) actions as agent rather than recipient in this scene. But Puck is not the agent. Puck himself and all the other fairies are in fact the creation of this wisest aunt's saddest tale or others like it. As he makes this old aunt fall down on her bum in the middle of her story, Puck's malice can be read as

<sup>99</sup> See Paster, 126.

a refusal of his dependence, as a denial of his own point of origin. The implications of this denial, as well as its ultimate futility, can be easily interpreted as self-referential to the narrative act underlying *A Midsummer Night's Dream* itself.

An even more prominent refusal of origin is spoken by Theseus in his scornful pronouncement "I never may believe, / These antic fables nor these fairy toys" (5.1.3). As a figure with no basis in history, his denial of fictions is an erasure of himself as the creature of fiction. His presence onstage, where he voices his skepticism, is in fact a testament to the power of classical "antic fables"; and the audience has just seen the "truth," in terms of the play, of English "fairy toys." Theseus's rational disbelief rings hollow not only for Theseus as a fictional character. The patriarchal censorship of the shaping power of the bond with maternal figures, expressed through fairy tales, is also a self-erasure. It was not only Indian boys who left a feminine bower of sensual delights for a masculine world.<sup>100</sup> Denials by adult males—humanists, Puritan ministers, statesmen—are rendered as patently false as Theseus's denial. Like Theseus, early modern males were equally the creatures of "fairy tales." What a psychoanalytic critic might represent in terms of an oedipal anxiety of maternal influence becomes in Shakespeare's play the social exclusion not only of mothers but also of female caregivers and the common culture which produced them. Internalized under the sign of negation, this "low" domain became constitutive of the identity of the elite male, whose disgust for "old wives' fairy rubbish" bears the mark of desire.<sup>101</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream* thus opens a space for rethinking the privileging of the "great" culture over the common culture, of Athens over England, of urban over rural, of literate over illiterate, of male writers over "wise aunts."

The play serves finally as a vehicle through which elite males especially could define, or redefine, their own positions in the inherent conflict, internalized within their own subjectivities, set into motion by their removal from a common culture.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>100</sup> In addition to Montrose, *Purpose*, 124–50, see Louis Adrian Montrose, "Shaping Fantasies: Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture," *Representations* 2 (1983): 61–94.

<sup>101</sup> The general lines of my argument show the obvious influence of Stallybrass and White (191 and *passim*). Their lucid representation of the Freudian concept of negation is also applicable to the early modern treatment of old wives' tales: "the content of the repressed image does indeed make its way into consciousness, but on the condition that it is denied, devalued, and negated. Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed; indeed, it is already a lifting of repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed" (Freud 1925: 437–8); it is for this reason that "disgust bears the impress of desire" (76).

<sup>102</sup> In the seventeenth century fairies became part of a popular "mirth" that, as Leah Marcus has pointed out in *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986), the Stuart kings promoted to preserve their own authority against the Puritans and other members of the rising middle class. In the small renaissance of fairy literature, including such works such as Michael Drayton's "Nymphidia," growing out of the English court and court sympathizers, references to fairies seldom enacted an acceptance of common

Audience members may have refused to acknowledge or remained honestly unaware of any personal connection with a common culture encountered in childhood; some of them may not have encountered it. Rather than encoding a single meaning, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* reaches out to perform a variety of operations on audience members according to their own ideologies and personal experiences. The play's inclusion of disjunctive settings, each with its own form of narrative, is a complex ideological act operating simultaneously on aesthetic, social, and psychological registers. Playing its music in both learned and common registers, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents interpretive choices according to social divisions operating not only between but within individual audience members. Marking where aesthetic pleasure lies, visceral responses of laughter or distaste may sometimes disturb as often as confirm external signifiers of social allegiance. Even the effect of the play's conservative move toward the creation of a popular culture, distorting the nature and power of its common origins, cannot be entirely predicted. Even though Titania yields the child to Oberon, even though she comes to "loathe" Bottom's "visage" (5.1.78), even though she finally accedes to the will of her mate, the rich and magical scenes in which Titania reigns supreme in her forest, like the scenes of early childhood, retain a haunting power that no memorial shame can entirely undo.

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culture. The graceful fairies of Ben Jonson's masque *Oberon, The Faery Prince*, for example, receive directions to continue their courtly dances precisely in order to distinguish themselves from "the course, and countrey *Faery*, / That doth haunt the harth, or dairy" (*Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925–52], 7:337–56, esp. 355).